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COSTA RICA IN 1912

Frank G. Carpenter Has an Interview With President Jimenez About His Country and People



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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica. HAVE just had a talk with Costa Rica's democratic president. His name is Don Ricardo Jimenez and he was elected two years ago by a majority vote of the people. This was so in spite of the opposition of the administration and the Catholic church. However, the voters told the priests that they were electing a president and not a bishop, and they preferred Don Ricardo. The new president is democratic in his administration, and I am told he has even subleased a part of the presidential mansion to private parties to increase the government revenues. It was in the audience room of this house that he received me. The president is a man of good education and fine address. A lawyer by profession, he speaks several languages, and it was in good American English that our conversation was carried on.

The Government of Costa Rica.

But let me give you some idea of the government of this little republic. Costa Rica is the quietest and best ruled of all Central America, and its presidents are the choice of the people and not the result of revolutions, as in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras. The country got its independence about 73 years ago, and it was in 1847 that it formally adopted the title of the Republic of Costa Rica. It now has a president and congress, each elected for a term of four years, and that only. The president cannot have a second consecutive term. The manner of the election is by an electoral college, just as is our custom at home. I asked President Jimenez what he thought of this method. He said it was a mistake and that the best way would be to choose the executive by the direct vote of the people.

The president of Costa Rica has a little different form of administration than President Taft. He has a cabinet, it is true, but he has also a government council, which consists of the cabinet and such other citizens as he may choose to appoint. The salary of the president is just about one-ninth that of President Taft. He gets a little over \$8000 a year, or, in the money of this country, 18,000 colones.

Costa Rica and the Canal.

During our talk the Panama canal was referred to, and I asked his excellency what effect this would have upon Costa Rica. He replied that it would benefit it. Said he:

"It will open up some excellent lands, which we have not far from the coast on the western side of the mountains. There are large tracts there which would raise the best of coffee, and by the canal we shall be able to have a cheap outlet for that crop to the markets of Europe. In the past we have been much hampered by having only one railroad. I mean that from here to Port Limon on the Atlantic coast. That road has been controlled by the United Fruit

company, whose chief interest is in the shipment of bananas, and it has let the coffee wait knowing that it had the monopoly and that there was no other way for it to get to the coast. We have bettered that condition by building a government railway to the Pacific and we have now no trouble. When the canal is finished there will be a demand for our Pacific coast lands and that part of Costa Rica will grow.

"We expect also an increase in our traffic on the Caribbean side of the mountains. A competition has arisen as to the trade in bananas, and with two companies operating the business should greatly increase. The banana is, as you know, our chief money crop. It amounts to something like 11,000,000 bunches a year and sells for \$4,000,000 and upward. Our exports of coffee are often in the neighborhood of \$3,000,000 per annum. Coffee and bananas are our principal sources of income."

The Investments in Coffee Lands.

"Is there much undeveloped land in Costa Rica, your excellency?" asked I.

"There is a great deal, but it needs capital to bring it under cultivation. If we had that and the right shipping facilities we could produce nine or ten times as many bananas as now and could materially increase our coffee plantations. What we need is more money and I should be glad to see American capital brought here. The trouble with your moneyed men, however, is that they are too visionary. You show them a piece of rock with a little gold in it, and they will open their pocketbooks almost without investigation. They may also put money into bananas if they are properly shown, but a sure thing like the coffee of Costa Rica they do not appreciate. This land produces some of the best coffee of the world. The conditions of cultivation are well known, and the opportunities for money-making in it are excellent. I am hoping that your people will take up the coffee lands on the west coast as soon as the canal is open to trade."

"I suppose money invested in Costa Rica would be safe?" said I, interrogatively.

"Most certainly it would if put in the right place and with due regard to the examination of titles. We have an excellent title system in this country, and you can buy land just as safely here as you can at your home. There is no danger of revolutions and the conditions are quite as reliable as anywhere in the world."

Why Costa Rica Has No Revolutions.

"Why is it, your excellency, that Costa Rica does not have revolutions? They are common in the other Central American republics and also in Mexico now."

"There are a number of reasons," replied Don Ricardo. "In the first place this is a small country and our people have plenty to do to make a living without wanting to fight. Our nation is a peace-loving one. The population is not like that of Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras, which is largely composed of Indian blood. The



Don Ricardo Jimenez, President of Costa Rica.

most of our inhabitants are pure whites. You will see this as you walk through the streets, and especially out through the country. You will see many barefooted and the faces and feet are as white as your own. These people are the descendants of Spaniards from the northern part of the Iberian peninsula. We have comparatively few Indians and our ancestors did not intermarry with them.

"Another reason why Costa Rica has no revolutions," continued the president, "is because the lands here are very evenly distributed. We have a large number of real estate owners, and nearly every countryman has his own little farm with his patch of bananas, his garden of fruits, his fields for vegetables or grain and his little coffee plantation. The people will not leave these to go out to fight, and you cannot get them to take up arms against the government. They say they cannot leave their farms, and that it pays them to remain at home. They realize they are far better off without revolutions."

The Boundary With Panama.

"What is the population of Costa Rica?" "It is less than 400,000, but the country could support many times that number. Costa Rica has an area larger than many of your states. It is bigger than Maryland, Massachusetts and Delaware combined."

"But you do not know just what land you have? I understand that the boundary between you and Panama is unsettled."

"Yes, that is so, but the amount of land in dispute is not great. The question of the boundary was first submitted to President Loubet, the president of the French republic, but his decision was so manifestly unjust that the question was again opened up and we have chosen the chief justice of the United States supreme court to arbitrate it. A commission of Americans is now making the surveys and mapping the boundaries, and it will soon be satisfactorily settled. This work is costing a great deal of money, however, and I am in doubt whether the cost will not more than equal the value of the lands in dispute."

"What is the feeling here as regards the United States?"

"It is friendly. We had some trouble with the United Fruit company, but that has passed away and the two nations are on the best of terms. We do most of our trading with you, and you sell us over half of all that we buy. The most of our coffee goes to Europe, but you still take the bulk of our bananas. I am in hopes to see the relations of the two countries come closer and closer."

Earthquakes and the Canal.

The conversation here turned again to the canal, and I said to President Jimenez:

"You are living here in the earthquake belt. Some of your cities have been shaken out of existence and you are subject to volcanic disturbances every few months. Do you think that the earthquakes will ever de-

stroy the Panama canal?"

"I would not like to prophesy as to that," was the reply. "I understand that Panama has had but few earthquakes, but one can never tell what will come. You had better ask Colonel Goethals that question."

"I did ask him," said I, "and his reply was that when the national capitol at Washington was crumbled to earth by a quake that he would be afraid for the canal, but not until then."

"I am glad he is so confident," replied the president of Costa Rica. "I wish I could be as sure of the safety of my own little country."

Costa Rica's Debt.

I then asked the president some questions as to the debt of Costa Rica. He replied that this had now been put on a sound financial basis, and that both the foreign debt and the internal debt would in time be paid. The foreign debt amounts to about 17,000,000 colones, or something like \$8,000,000, and the internal debt is much less. The foreign bondholders met last January and approved of the settlement proposed by Costa Rica, and the debt has now been refunded at something like 4 or 5 per cent on par, but with a big discount to the underwriters, as I am told. The president of Costa Rica does not consider a public debt a public blessing, but he believes that money might be borrowed and if properly expended it would be of great good to Costa Rica.

I asked his excellency what he would do if he had \$10,000,000 in his treasury. As quick as a flash he replied:

"I would build roads. That is the crying need of this land. We have practically no highways of commerce except the line of railway which crosses the country from one side to the other. The only roads to the interior are trails, and here and there a wagon road, which during a part of the year is a river of mud. What Costa Rica needs most is cheap transportation, but I fear me it is long before we shall have what we should in that line."

Pulling the Teeth of the Tropics.

During the talk President Jimenez referred to the great work that has been done at Panama in what some one has called "pulling the teeth of the tropics." I mean the sanitation methods which have turned our canal zone from being the pest hole of the world to one of the healthiest spots upon earth. The president says that our work is being studied by many of the Latin American republics, and that new health methods are being introduced everywhere. He referred to our fight with the hookworm and the discoveries made in Porto Rico, saying that Costa Rica was fighting this parasite in the same way.

The country has a medical board, which gives hookworm medicine free of charge to all who apply, and it is sending physicians out to study the disease and to treat the people. So far but little impression has been made upon the health of the country,

but the work is at its beginning, and in time it will do great good. Costa Rica is noted for its live interest in sanitary matters. It is now improving the waterworks at San Jose, and is bringing in mountain water through a pipe something like 18 miles long. A new system of sewers is being introduced, and there are New York parties here who are putting down blocks of new streets with a view to making contracts for repaving the capital.

An Up-to-Date Nation.

Indeed, I find this little republic inhabited by what might be called the most up-to-date and progressive people of all the nations of Central America. It is still overloaded with the debts due to the mistakes of the past, but nevertheless it is struggling along the road of modern civilization. It has a good school system. Education is compulsory and it is said that there are more teachers in the republic than soldiers. There are 32,000 children in the primary and secondary schools and there are colleges of one kind or another in most of the cities. The government is spending almost a dollar a head per annum on its educational branch and the cost for every pupil is estimated at \$12 per year. At the same rate we should be spending something like \$90,000,000 per annum on our public schools.

The government has a secretary of public instruction and the whole country is divided up into circuits and school districts. Each district has its school board and every circuit has its inspector, who goes about and examines the schools and the teachers. Some of the high schools are supported entirely by the national treasury, but these have normal training departments to supply teachers for the graded schools. The normal schools are for both men and women and they have many government scholarships. As it is now the national government buys all the text books for the normal schools, but except in the case of the poor the children have to buy their own books.

In addition to the native schools there is a large number of the wealthy Costa Ricans who send their children abroad to be educated. The most of this class speaks several languages, including the English. More of the young men go to the United States for their education than to Europe and many of the young women are sent to the colleges and convents of France.

Books and Newspapers.

One can see something of the literary tastes of the Costa Rican by a look at the book stores of San Jose. There are a number of excellent ones, and in some you will find a good supply of English, French and German literature, including our best magazines and the New Orleans and New York daily papers. As to the native press, there are a half dozen dailies published, but they are mainly folios, and look like postage stamps in comparison with the blanket sheets of our Sunday journals.

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Costa Rican School Children



The Government Alcohol Factory at San Jose